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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the apparent disillusionment of current American society as attributed to alleged misguided values and the neglect of effective citizenship education. Acknowledging that the schools' attempts at values education have encountered problems, this is still a mission of social studies education. The paper examines the spirit of heroism as an important step in teaching/promoting the values of effective citizenship and promotes utilizing the depth and accuracy of commercial trade books to supplement the limited conventional textbook. Six selected trade books by Milton Meltzer and Russell Freedman note the commonality and continuity of values demonstrated by six "traditional" American heroes. Contains 14 notes and 4 references. (Author/BT)

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HEROES, VALUES, AND TRANSCENDING TIME: USING TRADE BOOKS TO TEACH VALUES

By Tony R. Sanchez

Presented at the Ackerman Conference for Democratic Citizenship,
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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the apparent disillusionment of our times as attributed to alleged misguided values and our neglect of effective citizenship education. Acknowledging that the school's attempts at values education have encountered problems, this is still a mission of social studies education. The author examines the spirit of heroism as an important step in teaching/promoting the values of effective citizenship and promotes utilizing the depth and accuracy of commercial trade books to supplement the limited conventional textbook. Six selected trade books by Milton Meltzer and Russell Freedman note the commonality and continuity of values demonstrated by six "traditional" American heroes.

KEY WORDS FOR INDEXING: values; citizenship; heroes; trade books

As the millenium approaches, Americans are poised to face what they perceive to be a new age with a vision of hope that will offset the apparent disillusionment of current times. We seem to believe that the dawn of a new century will usher in an age of contentment. In order to protect this as yet undefined vision, however, we must consider the alleged sources of our discontent; that is, this society's secularized values may be at fault due to our neglect of the moral enterprise of citizenship education (1).

Though rightfully the mission of the total school experience, citizenship education has typically been in the realm of social studies (2). But even social studies educators have struggled with the concept, though it is generally conceded that the "responsible" or "effective" citizen must be knowledgeable, concerned, and an active participant in the democratic process (3). The dimensions of social concern, however, dictate that we must expand beyond these conventional boundaries and clarify them. What is worth knowing? What should we be concerned about? Why bother to participate? The major issue that is being overlooked, of course, is values education.

The Obstacle of Values

Values education is an integral component of social studies education in that it gives meaning to appropriate knowledge and necessary skills of the human experience (4). Values cannot always be succinctly defined, measured, or even observed, but conversely they can be analyzed, clarified, examined, and taught. Likewise, values in the classroom cannot be avoided due to the nature of social studies content and the meaning of citizenship in American society because it is becoming increasingly difficult to deny that the truths of human experience must be faced and coped with (5).

Certainly there has always been an issue of what values should be taught and how they should be taught. But perhaps at no other time has the issue been more important when one considers that although the formula for Coca-Cola is still a virtual top-secret, one can readily surf the Internet to find instructions for making explosives. If such can be attributed to the "wrong" values, few would deny that practicing the "right" values would appreciably assist our collective vision of the 21st century's American Dream. It remains the educator's task to pinpoint those values in order to deal with them. It will also require some effective guidance, the lack of which will result in falling prey to the most persuasive institution (6). Thus we are witnessing the power of the media and its unabashed approach to being the voice of values in the popular culture.

In the zeal to promote the virtues of values education as a vehicle for the social studies, however, it must be acknowledged that research indicates some serious problems and paradoxes. A wide variety of approaches to teaching values exists, but educators are either confused as to their appropriateness and effectiveness or they concede to being inadequately prepared to seriously address the issue. Indeed, research clearly indicates that some approaches, such as values clarification, don't bring significantly positive results. Further, the research on values education is disappointingly small, contradictory, and inconclusive. For educators who believe in the endeavor, however, it generally remains a good intention unfulfilled, even though character education is a current issue in several state curricula (7).

In spite of this dilemma, there are still numerous educators who strongly endorse values education and attempt to incorporate it within the curriculum. What guidance exists that may assist the endeavor?

Enter the Hero

An often overlooked possibility for promoting values is to look at who our heroes are, for they reflect our cultural values. Promoting the essence of heroes is to promote our own potential. They may provide an inspirational link that not only allows them to become part of our moral fiber (10), but also invites us to assimilate those traits and values that can make any of us a hero. Assisting students in examining the spirit of heroism is to invite them to adopt that spirit themselves, to embrace the qualities and characteristics endemic to the hero.

Heroes are not unique to ancient or modern cultures and certainly not exclusively to American culture. But like every culture, we believe American heroes are a special lot (11). Whether one believes that they are products of their times or creators of their times, individuals who have triumphed over life's challenges have long been historically recognized, acknowledged for some action(s), and appreciated in some way. They embodied traits and values reflective of their respective culture in such a way that set them apart from the rest, promoting a worship and admiration that transcended time and the American Dream.

We often hear of the yearning for a bygone era, an age when our values were "the right ones." Such a revisiting conjures visions of individuals whose character but mostly actions symbolized what we may currently seek in terms of guidance. We call some of them heroes and though the passage of time- and changing values- may have altered our evaluations of them, they embodied a special and perhaps similar vision of the American Dream. Why look back? On the dark eve of America's entry into World War II, Wecter

answered that question by stating "a nation that cannot evoke the spirit of its dead heroes and the birth of new ones, in a time of crisis, is doomed" (12).

The spirit of heroism has inevitably evolved from era to era. But at least one characteristic of it has not, making "old" heroes worth revisiting: they were vulnerably and modestly willing to risk an action(s) for the benefit of others. This trait, this value, above all others, appears to be paramount to the hero, and it transcends time. Examining heroes can reveal a common core of exemplary qualities, characteristics, and values whose link to the development of our own lives acknowledges our potential. Unlike the celebrity who merely "is," the true hero "does" and thus inspires. Unlike the anti-hero whose values seek to undermine, the hero's values symbolize the moral/ethical standards that perpetuate the culture. One need not look for a "perfect" hero who transcends time, for he/she must remain in the context of the times. Rather, his/her values can transcend the circumstances of an era (13). It all depends upon how one defines a hero/heroine and how the story is told.

Perhaps an appropriate starting point is a working definition of a hero to begin the exploration of the concept. A recent study of 80 individuals, aged 10-90, compared and contrasted heroes/heroines across generational lines for notable trends and patterns. It also resulted in a synthesized definition that will be utilized in this work: A hero/heroine is a person who performs a voluntary action(s) that symbolizes the moral/ethical standards of the culture (14).

Telling the Story

Even with a working definition in hand, however, any exploration and promotion of heroes in the social studies will require more than a cursory reading assignment from

the conventional textbook with its acknowledged one-dimensional shortcomings. Most elementary and secondary level social studies textbooks narrowly and infrequently depict any complete development/portrayal of heroes/heroines and more rarely explore those values and traits reflective of either the individual or the culture in context. What is usually found is an overly positive, brief, and one-dimensional manifestation of an individual who evidently must rely on name recognition. As far as textbooks go, this is the nature of the beast, but to sacrifice a complete development of the hero is to shortchange the opportunity to better understand our heritage, for it eliminates an opportunity for students to identify with the hero, an identity that can be forged only through an extended and accurate narrative (15). If we wish to seriously promote and explore the hero concept, whose full development requires an in-depth and accurate examination, we can turn to commercial trade books as a viable source.

The Utilization of Trade Books

Many social studies educators are incorporating the use of commercial trade books as an integral supplement to the curriculum. Despite the fact that further investigation is warranted to measure their potential (16), advocates can note their positive aspects. Many are well-written and well-developed by renowned authors whose subjects serve as complements and extensions that the conventional textbook cannot possibly explore in the proper depth. Besides depth, of course, the major contention is accuracy, which helps clarify the values and traits of the multidimensional hero within the context of time. Though it is the educator's responsibility to expand his/her knowledge horizons, which will validate accuracy, some definitive works are available as guides for pursuing the study of heroes and the values they embody.

The crucial aspect of examining the hero is to go underneath the image and the myth to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of his humanity. Therein lies the truth of his values. These are revealed by the author who has done his historical homework. America's past (and present) has been inhabited by many such individuals, but to revisit "traditional" heroes is not merely an exercise in nostalgia. Every generation interprets history and the individuals who played their roles in it based upon its own perspective. But from any perspective we may rediscover in them the values we yearn for today, symbolic values that perpetuate the illusive yet attainable American Dream.

The examination of traditional heroes necessitates going beyond the one-dimensional caricature accounts typically found in textbooks to discover the warts as well as the crown. Only this kind of multidimensional portrayal can lend to the scope of humanity that allows us to understand the nature of heroism and further allows us to engage students in a dialogue to analyze the relevance of values. The selected trade books by Milton Meltzer and Russell Freedman do exactly that. Revisiting their subjects will reveal a commonality of certain values to consider as building blocks for citizenship education.

George Washington and the Birth of Our Nation. Milton Meltzer. New York: Franklin Watts, 1986.

Any examination of traditional heroes almost certainly must begin with the quintessential American, George Washington. In this book, Meltzer goes far beyond the one-dimensional, stiff account of the man found in every textbook. Instead, he dares to show us the warts as well as the crown. And there were warts. Virtually every position Washington ever assumed (and in many cases, inherited) found him unqualified and

inexperienced. No military historian has ever rated him as a genius. Though an avid reader, his lack of formal education left him self-conscious and sorely lacking, especially as a speaker. Probably America's first millionaire, the Squire of Mount Vernon (another inheritance) was constantly in financial difficulties. Slaveowner (despite his support of "all men are created equal"), gambler, gamesman, dancer, and "in love with love" (p.30), he was a reluctant leader who was also acutely aware of being a legend in his own time. Fame, however, was a nuisance and demand that he persistently and unsuccessfully fought against.

His ascension to hero status began inauspiciously as the third of seven children. His self-centered mother gave him little reason to love her and his father was a restless, insecure man. He was not born into wealth or a ruling family by any stretch. But it was Washington's self-proclaimed philosophy that set the standard for his values, as he firmly believed that one must "take care to perform the part assigned to us in a way that reason and their own consciences approve of" (p.61). He could never refuse the responsibility and obligation of duty and led with a keen sense of fair play, modesty, and integrity, exhibiting faith while others doubted. His life became an example of learning from one's mistakes and his values became the acknowledged standard for others as the new republic took form.

Washington considered himself first and foremost an American. Tired and in declining health, "his one concern was to make America succeed and to do it peacefully" (p.152). Only as "proof against all danger of tyranny" (p.139) did he consent to be the first Chief Executive and forged it based upon his own high standards in constant fear that failure would destroy the new fragile republic. His life has been easily and

frequently obscured by myth and misconception, but in this book we view a dimensional life that reveals values transcending time.

Lincoln: In His Own Words. Milton Meltzer (ed.). Orlando: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1993.

Lincoln: A Photobiography. Russell Freedman. New York: Clarion Books, 1987.

An equally powerful symbol of heroism is that of Abraham Lincoln. Often hailed as our greatest president, his fame rests securely upon his Gettysburg Address (which few students are rarely taught to analyze though many must memorize it) and his assassination climaxing the darkest moment in our history. To understand the full scope of the man, words and images are the key to offsetting his conventional one-dimensional portrayal. Meltzer provides a unique view of the man's life, thoughts, and actions by focusing on Lincoln's letters, speeches, and public papers. It is almost as if one can hear his voice. In an interesting balance, Freedman chronicles Lincoln's life by supporting text with photos and drawings. While each author attempts to trace the man's inner being, Lincoln's eloquent words and revealing images forever capture the essence of the most-photographed man of his time to unveil a truly dimensional model of a man whose mind and spirit preserved the union.

In truth he was indeed born of humble beginnings in a log cabin. He was also the poor boy who basically educated himself and made good, but he was hardly the common man of legend. A wealthy lawyer of unbridled ambition, he was in essence a loser who was defeated in almost every contest. Relentless in his pursuit of political success, his eloquence as a speaker with wit masked the moodiness and melancholy of a man "tormented by long and frequent bouts of depression" (Freedman, p.4). He was a man of

mystery to even his closest friends, so the myth and legend surrounding him have made it easier to understand him as a hero today. However in his own time he was roundly denounced and scorned as the most disreputable leader we had ever had, but no one was better fitted to the challenge of his time.

Lincoln's otherwise obscure life is focused upon the actions of his last four years. His conduct during the most harrowing time in our history was preeminent in the annals of leadership. To save his country from dismemberment and to free it from slavery required a magnitude of perseverance that few can understand, let alone emulate. He used his power with humility and valued being the vehicle of the common good. His words reflect the strength of his convictions, for this was the right thing to do, while his images reflect the price he was willing to pay for the mission.

His assassination proved to be the ultimate sacrifice: he died for the cause and, unfairly, only then was he catapulted to hero status. His heroism may ironically be more dependent upon his death than it should be for the values of a man who understood the price of power and was willing to pay it.

Theodore Roosevelt and His America. Milton Meltzer. New York: Franklin Watts, 1994.

One of the most critical and extraordinary periods of American transition was the post-Civil War industrial revolution and the Progressive Era of the latter 1800's and early 1900's. Amidst that turmoil of change emerged an equally extraordinary and tumultuous individuals: Theodore Roosevelt. Meltzer presents the life of the legendary Rough Rider through his letters and journals and, very poignantly, against the backdrop of the times in which he lived.

A man of wealth and boundless energy, TR's colorful personality hid the pain of a man tormented and scarred by the personal tragedy of family losses, an ingrained racism, and numerous physical afflictions of which the general public was totally unaware. He was a man-child who "truly loved power and would exercise it in a way few presidents before him had ever done" (p.193). Or would do. His persistent ambition for personal power placed him, by accident of assassination when he was politically stonewalled, on "the world's biggest stage to act on" (p.115); and TR was quite the showman.

Like many who willingly grab onto the reins of power, TR could be enigmatic depending upon the circumstance. He could be cautious, then reckless, irresistible and appealing, then totally detestable. His fight for conservation aroused an uninformed public to his side, yet his retreat on racial equality proved to be a serious setback for both minorities and himself. He shaped a foreign policy as ambitious and tough as he was, but his domestic policy was often "more noise than accomplishment" (p.120). Above it all, the consummate player masterfully adjusted to his advantage the shifts in public opinion.

In the end, however, it was his arrogance that did him in and nearly destroyed his life's work. Leaving the power of the presidency and retiring at the too-early age of 50 from the political arena removed him from the limelight of the only life he knew and it would mark a sadness to the remainder of his life. Convinced that "the nation's future would be safe only in his hands" (p.176), his dramatic and foolish attempt at a comeback was disastrous. Physically, emotionally, and politically, his time had passed. But his values provided an enduring legacy for those who would succeed through his example: win or lose, one must persevere and face the challenges head-on.

Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life of Discovery. Russell Freedman. New York: Clarion Books, 1993.

In an era that rarely acknowledged a woman's accomplishments, Eleanor Roosevelt was undoubtedly among the most influential individuals of her time. Her passion for human rights showcased a courage that few have ever been able to match and her role as the First Lady has become the standard of measure for those who came both before and after her.

Freedman portrays a simple yet unconventional individual whose life proves that it is never too late to seize the moment. Never beautiful in the physical sense, Eleanor grew up with a sense of fear. Serious and reserved, her upbringing was complicated by the deaths of her parents before she was ten. She became convinced that she could never measure up to what she was expected to be. Fate, however, had plans for her genuine warmth and intelligence.

Her marriage to the self-assured and soon-to-be famous Franklin Roosevelt provided the springboard. She put her energy into being a successful wife and mother, though the latter was always an insecure position for her. Supporting FDR's skyrocketing political career while being the mother of five gave her a new direction in "taking on new tasks and meeting new people" (p.60). The turning points in her life, of course, came with FDR's extra-marital affair and his polio. Humiliated and betrayed, their marriage became a partnership of mutual interests without intimacy.

Eleanor emerged from these ordeals toughened, with a courage and confidence gained from daring to face her fears. Acting from the start of his presidency as her husband's trouble-shooter, she became a vocal advocate for the downtrodden and

disadvantaged. Her happiness came from taking the opportunities to do something useful and, more importantly, those things she thought she could not do. Her actions and accomplishments quickly redefined her role as First Lady into a partnership nearly on equal par with the presidency.

After FDR's death, she came to terms with her loss and continued to work for the cause of human rights as a delegate to the United Nations. "She had always found a sense of fulfillment in being useful" (p.158) but perhaps her greatest legacy was her extraordinary courage to willingly face that which must be overcome and to meet any challenge in spite of fear or lack of talent.

The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane. Russell Freedman. New York: Holiday House, 1991.

Sometimes a heroic endeavor gives little clue as to its eventual outcome, a situation especially true in the case of inventors. Though the invention of a flying machine fulfilled humankind's dream of soaring with eagles, Wilbur and Orville Wright could not possibly have foreseen the revolutionary age whose door they unlocked.

Freedman relates a photographic account of two brothers who, without so much as a high school diploma, built and successfully flew the first mechanically powered, sustained, and controlled airplane. Theirs is a tale that goes beyond the oft-told story of bicycle mechanics who made good. It is, rather, a story of what it takes to make a dream come true.

In some respects, the brothers are caricatures. They did not smoke, drink, or marry, and lived with their widowed minister father and spinster sister. But utilizing many photos taken by the brothers themselves, Freedman reveals multi-dimensional lives

of two who "lived together, played together, worked together and, in fact, thought together"(p.3), forming a virtually inseparable unit whose journey took them to acclaim. Wilbur, the older of the two by four years, was quietly confident, serious, and rather careless in his attire. Orville, in contrast, was impulsive, clothes conscious, and a practical joker. Both had a great mechanical aptitude which they readily attributed to their mother. Wilbur was the visionary who first dreamed of building the airplane, but it was Orville's enthusiasm that sustained the quest. Together they were the perfect team, partners as well as brothers, living by the encouragement of their father who instilled in them that hard work and determination would allow them to accomplish any goal, if they wanted it badly enough.

The road to Kitty Hawk led first to a number of joint ventures, which included publishing a neighborhood newspaper, a printing business, the hobby of photography, and, of course, their very successful bicycle shop which established their reputations as skilled mechanics. But always, seemingly, there was the dream of mechanized flight, a dream that would require four long years to achieve. Aeronautics was at best an infant science, which meant the brothers would encounter engineering problems that literally a handful had encountered before. There were no experienced practitioners of aviation to advise them in "exploring a new and unknown domain" (p.2). Infinite patience, ingenuity, and enthusiasm were their chief tools but ultimately it was their perseverance and trust in each other that resulted in the first successful flight in December 1903.

The Wrights continued to change and improve the air machine in the sudden midst of competitors as the age of aviation exploded. Though only Orville would live long enough to witness the jet age but not the ensuing space age, there must have been a

great satisfaction for the brothers to know that their uncompromising determination ushered in an age based upon a dream that they alone first achieved.

Conclusion

How can revisiting past heroes help educators to fashion the tools required for effective citizenship? It can uncover common traditions, beliefs, and values that are the cornerstones of a heritage which has undergone significant change and yet has a continuity that gives shape to our culture. That continuity rests in the values of its common and uncommon people, past and present. Some, labeled as heroes, dared to face their challenges and in doing so influenced the direction of not only their own lives but those around them. The subjects of these trade books are in essence morality lessons whose narrative depth and accuracy allow us to develop empathy and understanding of the successes and failures of the human experience. Regardless of the circumstances of their times, they shared a core of common values: courage, perseverance, and daring to risk for the benefit of others. Morally, politically, and personally, they inspire us through the examples of their lives, for in many respects they promote a vision of the heroism within each of us.

Notes

1. This paper was presented at the Ackerman/TELL Conference for Democratic Citizenship, Purdue University, July 18, 1998. The author wishes to thank Dr. Phil VanFossen, Dr. Lynn Nelson, and Professor Jill May for their editorial comments and suggestions.
2. Walter C. Parker and John Jarolimek, *Social Studies in Elementary Education (10th ed.)* (Upper Saddle River: Merrill, 1997), 10.
3. Peter H. Martorella, *Teaching Social Studies in Middle and Secondary Schools (2nd ed.)* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill, 1996), 21.
4. *Ibid.*, 15; George Maxim, *Social Studies and the Elementary School Child (5th ed.)* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill, 1995).
5. Michael O. Tunnell, "Unmasking the Fiction of History: Children's Historical Literature Begins to Come of Age," in Michael O. Tunnell and Richard Ammon, eds., *The Story of Ourselves* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993).
6. Tony R. Sanchez, "It's Time for Heroes, Again: Or Were They Ever Gone?" Manuscript submitted for publication.
7. James S. Leming, "Research on Social Studies Curriculum and Instruction: Interventions and Outcomes in the Socio-Moral Domain," in William B. Stanley, ed., *Review of Research in Social Studies Education: 1976-1983* (Boulder, CO: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1985), Arizona and Texas are formally implementing values and character education in their curricula.

8. Samuel Brodbelt and Robert Wall, "An Examination of the Presentation of Heroes and Heroines in Current (1974-1984) Secondary Social Studies Textbooks," ERIC Digest No. ED257726 (Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1985).

9. Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America* (New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1941).

10. *Ibid.*, 107.

11. Tony R. Sanchez, "It's Time for Heroes, Again: Or Were They Ever Gone?" Manuscript submitted for publication; Robert Penn Warren, "Introduction," in Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America* (New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1941), xiii-xxvii; Franklin J. Schaffener, director, *Patton* [Film] (Twentieth-Century Fox Film Corporation, 1970).

12. Tony R. Sanchez, "It's Time for Heroes, Again: Or Were They Ever Gone?" Manuscript submitted for publication; Daniel Boorstin, *The Image* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987).

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